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East Helena receives \$500,000 ArtPlace America grant

Project will create culinary school and community art projects

For decades, East Helena held community-wide picnics hosted by the Asarco Smelter, with everyone welcome. Everyone would bring food to share, often tied to their ethnic roots, and play ball games and horseshoes.

It is this community spirit East Helena seeks to rekindle with a \$500,000 grant it received Tuesday from ArtPlace America.

The grant will help the town create an **East Helena Food and Culture Hub**, a program to celebrate the town's unique identity, create a new culinary training program to support local businesses, and engage local artists to inspire East Helena citizens in community planning.

“Congratulations to East Helena on this well-deserved award that will not only prepare folks today to fill the jobs of tomorrow, but will also ensure small businesses can continue to find success, grow, and contribute back to the community,” said Lt. Governor Cooney, who attended a celebration in East Helena Tuesday.

Project partners include the City of East Helena, the East Helena School District, the Environmental Protection Agency, entrepreneur Shalon Hastings of Taco del Sol, the Helena Community Offender Re-entry Program and The Myrna Loy.

The project harkens back to some of the unique events that make East Helena a welcoming and special place to live. It will fund community feasts, music and storytelling events, and other arts-related projects designed to inspire East Helenans and engage them in future planning.

“It starts with food—celebrating food,” said East Helena Mayor Jamie Schell. “At its core, this is a workforce development effort, but overall it is designed to use the arts to engage the whole community in planning for the future.”

The grant was highly competitive with 987 applying, and East Helena as one of 23 recipients out of 70 finalists.

“ArtPlace America saw in this community and us something they don’t see elsewhere,” Schell said, and he believes it’s the way all the community groups came together to work on the grant.

School Superintendent Ron Whitmoyer said the culinary arts program will use school kitchens, home ec classrooms and East Helena businesses. It will help expand the school’s adult education program to include culinary arts and other job training courses.

The grant was written by Krys Holmes of The Myrna Loy to demonstrate how effectively artists can help build community vitality.

Holmes said the ArtPlace team that visited East Helena this summer was “totally charmed,” noting the new school, trail system and housing going up in the community and its strong community partnerships.

“They saw this little town in the shadow of the slag pile re-envisioning its future,” Holmes said.

Javier Torres of ArtPlace America said the grant-makers are “absolutely thrilled to be investing in East Helena.”

“This project is a shining example of how rural communities can design equitable futures for themselves by elevating the unique culture and character of their place,” he said. “The comprehensive culinary arts workforce program that East Helena, The Myrna Loy and their partners have developed will undoubtedly create great economic opportunity for the region.”

ArtPlace America is a 10-year collaboration by a number of foundations, federal agencies and financial institutions that works to put arts and culture at the center of community planning and building.

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For more information, call Mayor Jamie Schell 406-465-2921 or Krys Holmes 406-443-0287

ArtPlace America website <https://www.artplaceamerica.org/>